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Mazzei, Micaela; Teasdale, Simon; Calo, Francesca and Roy, Michael (2020). Co-production and the third sector: conceptualising different approaches to service user involvement. *Public Management Review*, 22(9) pp. 1265–1283.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/14719037.2019.1630135>

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To cite this article: Micaela Mazzei , Simon Teasdale , Francesca Calò & Michael J. Roy (2020) Co-production and the third sector: conceptualising different approaches to service user involvement, Public Management Review, 22:9, 1265-1283, DOI: [10.1080/14719037.2019.1630135](https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1630135)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1630135>



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Published online: 21 Jun 2019.



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# Co-production and the third sector: conceptualising different approaches to service user involvement

Micaela Mazzei , Simon Teasdale , Francesca Calò  and Michael J. Roy 

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## ABSTRACT

The centrality of the third sector in the co-production of public services is seemingly based on the assumption that it can act as an effective proxy for service users. However, the third sector encompasses a broad range of organisational forms, interests and governance arrangements, which all have implications for the type and nature of relationships between the sector and its constituencies. Through analysis of empirical data drawn from research on a prominent co-production model in Scotland, we construct and present a typology of different approaches to service user involvement.

**KEYWORDS** Co-production; third sector; inclusion; engagement; governance; public management

## Introduction

A feature of public management literature, particularly over the last decade or so, has been the increasing emphasis upon the concept of ‘co-production’, an arrangement where citizens are involved, at least in part, in the production of their own services (Brandsen and Pestoff 2006). In many cases the third sector – broadly understood as non-profit and non-governmental organisations operating in and around civil society (Alcock 2010) – is directly included in co-production arrangements, not least because there is often an assumption that the third sector effectively represents the views of service users. However, rather than being homogenous, the third sector is a ‘loose and baggy monster’ (Kendall and Knapp 1995) encompassing a broad range of organisational types, interests and constituency groups, with considerable variation in the nature and types of relationship they have with their service users (Alcock and Kendall 2011). Given this heterogeneity, in this paper we explore variations in how third sector organisations represent the views of service users within co-production arrangements, and challenge the assumption that the third sector is always an effective proxy for meaningful service user engagement.

Drawing on empirical data gathered through research conducted on the progress of the Strategic Public Social Partnership (PSP) model in Scotland – a programme of support for co-production arrangements in specific sectors of public service provision, such as social care, health, transport and criminal justice (Scottish Government 2011) – we explore variations in the nature of, and relationship between, third sector

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organisations and service users in the context of co-production processes. We identify instances where service users are central to the process of service development, resonating with much of the extant co-production literature (Pestoff 2012; Brandsen and von Hout 2006; Pestoff, Osborne, and Brandsen 2006; Strokosch and Osborne 2017), but we also uncover considerable variation in the degrees of meaningful representation, revealing that the relationship between the third sector and service users is also contextually dependent (see Eriksson 2018). We thus add depth and nuance to extant understandings of relationships within co-production processes.

Our paper proceeds as follows: Firstly, drawing on different elements of the co-production and third sector literatures, we identify two broad criteria to consider when reflecting upon the ways in which third sector organisations relate to their service users: the degree of service user inclusion in third sector organisations governance arrangements, and the level of service user engagement in the co-production process. After outlining the method of analysis employed in this paper, we present our findings, which show how different types of third sector organisation are engaged in co-production processes through formal and informal relations with their service users. We also show variation in the degree of engagement that these third sector organisations maintain in the co-production process itself (that is, in the relationship between third sector and public sector organisations). Emerging from our findings, and relating these to the extant literature, we present an 'empirically-informed' typology of the different relationships between third sector organisations and service users which, we consider, reflects a greater variety of arrangements than has been ascribed by the literature to date. Finally, we conclude our paper with some reflections upon the implications of our findings for public management theory and practice, considering that third sector organisations cannot be simplistically assumed to be a proxy for service user engagement in co-production processes. So, when looking at these processes, commissioners of public services should consider what type of third sector organisation they are dealing with, and their level of engagement in the process: third sector governance arrangements by themselves are not sufficient to guarantee the effective inclusion of service users. Our findings thus extend knowledge of, and add nuance to, extant understandings of relationships within co-production processes to support the improvement of policy outcomes.

## **Understanding the role of the third sector in co-production arrangements**

While there is significant variety in conceptualisations of co-production (Ewert and Evers 2012; Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016), reflective of the different traditions and disciplinary lenses through which it has been studied, a common element to most understandings is the idea of citizen or service user involvement in the design and delivery of public services (Parks et al. 1981; Brandsen and Pestoff 2006). The extent of service user involvement is, however, a source of ongoing academic debate (see Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016). For some scholars, the involvement of service users is considered a voluntary effort to actively contribute to the design, evaluation and improvement of existing services (see Brandsen and Honingh 2016; Bovaird 2007). From this perspective, the emphasis is on how the participation of service users can be 'added into' the process of service planning and implementation in order to improve it (Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016, 641). By and large,

service users can be involved at all stages from co-planning to co-assessing (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012). Recognising the varying degrees of service user involvement in the design of services (Kershaw et al. 2018; Bovaird 2007), some scholars have used conceptual tools such as Arnstein's ladder of participation (1969), to consider the extent to which service users are meaningfully engaged in the co-production process.

Other approaches see the involvement of service users as an involuntary, inevitable and intrinsic part of the process of public service design and delivery (see Radnor et al. 2014). From this perspective, continuous interaction between service producers and users is vital to the process of service design and provision, whether the interactions are coerced, unconscious or, indeed, voluntary. The developing Public Service Logic literature for instance, borrows from public administration and service-logic theory and emphasises the value produced as a result of this iterative interaction (see Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016).

Although the involvement of the third sector in public policy and service delivery processes has thought to have increased in recent years (Brandsen and Johnston 2018; Williams et al. 2016; Osborne and McLaughlin 2004), research in public administration has understandably focused primarily on relationships between the state and third sector (see for example Bovaird 2007; Pestoff, Osborne, and Brandsen 2006; Osborne and McLoughlin 2004). Considerably less attention has been paid to relationships between the third sector and service users; the largely untested assumption is that the third sector is able to act as an effective proxy for service user involvement (NCVO, 2017).

By and large, the third sector is characterised as providing the space by which service users are (or at least supposed to be) directly involved in the planning and design of services (Bovaird 2007). This role might imply that the third sector organisation consists of citizens directly affected by services: in essence the third sector organisation *is* the service user (Pestoff 2012). Alternatively, third sector organisations might be involved in the planning and design of services (Strokosch and Osborne 2017), shaping them to reflect local needs (Brandsen and von Hout 2006). Here, third sector organisations are assumed to represent the needs of their users and employ that representation to activities such as policy formation in partnership with the state, including in networks that guarantee their involvement. In this case, the third sector is assumed *to be close to* service users, and hence possesses specialist knowledge of their needs (Kelly 2007).

However, we know from the wider third sector literature that this sector is characterised by considerable diversity (Macmillan 2013). Different forms of third sector organisation have different governance and management arrangements, different means of, and levels of, engagement with their constituent communities, and different impacts (Teasdale 2010). Commentators have developed a wide variety of ways of classifying third sector organisations including, for example, revenue structure, governance or membership types (Alcock and Kendall 2011). While some third sector organisations exercise meaningful participation of user groups and democratic governance (Elstube and Poole 2014), not all do, and there is a stream of scholarship that reveals the disjuncture between how such aspects operate in theory and in practice (see Smith and Teasdale 2012; Rees, Mullins, and Bovaird 2012).

For the purpose of this paper, we are therefore primarily interested in how governance structures of third sector organisations relate to their membership base. Anheier (2005) distinguishes between third sector organisations controlled by

trustees and *governed for* the benefit of their beneficiaries (termed ‘charitable organisations’) and, emerging from a North American tradition, organisations whose membership is open to all, whose trustees or elected representatives govern *on behalf of* this membership (‘membership organisations’). It can be argued that charitable organisations play a considerable role in the co-delivery of services, while membership organisations would seem better placed to act in the design of services but could also play a role in their delivery. These distinctions thus serve as a starting point to better understand the plurality of relationships between different types of third sector organisations and their members within the context of co-production arrangements. We next turn our attention to the context in which our study takes place, before describing the methods of data collection and analysis we employed.

## Background to the study

Our study took place in Scotland, where, from 2006 onwards, 13 pilot projects were established with the support and encouragement of the Scottish Government to design and deliver services appropriate to the needs of service users. The Scottish Government’s *Guide to Forming and Operating Public-Social Partnerships* defines these Public Social Partnerships (PSPs) as a ‘partnering arrangement which involves the Third Sector earlier and more deeply in the design and commissioning of public services’ (Scottish Government 2011, 4), with the rationale of ‘placing user-focused and sustainable service design at the centre of the PSP’ and using ‘third sector insight’ to break down traditional service delivery silos and encourage service user involvement (ibid, 5).

Following these pilots, in 2012 the Scottish Government’s Third Sector Unit supported the development of six ‘Strategic’ PSPs with a view to strengthen public-third sector partnership working, service user involvement and innovation in public service delivery in three key areas that the government considered to be especially important as demonstrator test-beds for the model: early years, criminal justice and care for older people. We were commissioned by the Scottish Government to evaluate the PSP model in Scotland. Each of the partnerships was characterized by different governance arrangements, involving different numbers of third sector organisations in each of the Strategic PSPs and various groups of service users, ranging from prisoners accessing a throughcare service; community transport provision; and vulnerable adults receiving health and social care support.

The results of the evaluation<sup>1</sup> were published elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> This paper specifically focuses on the theme of service user involvement, which emerged from the evaluation.

## Methods

Methodologically, we treat the Strategic PSP model in Scotland as the overall case (of co-production in the third sector). Within this case (Stake 1995), we focus on four embedded cases (of Strategic PSPs) – see Table 1. These Strategic PSPs were selected because the relationship between service users and the third sector organisation was clearly identifiable from the data.<sup>3</sup> Each Strategic PSP contained between one and three third sector organisations. Thus our data derive from nine third sector organisations within the overall case.

**Table 1.** The four strategic PSPs included in this study.

Strategic Public Social Partnership	Description	Governance	Third sector organisations involved	Service users
SPSP 1	This partnership was established in 2012, to develop and test a new approach to improve the throughcare support of offenders serving short term sentences. In terms of co-production arrangements, this was both co-design and co-delivery.	The Strategic PSP was led by one large UK charitable organisation	<u>One large charitable organisation</u> working across mental health, learning disability, substance misuse and employment. <u>Organisation A</u>	Offenders
SPSP 2	Established in 2012, this partnership was started in order to review and redesign supported living services for people with learning disabilities. In terms of co-production arrangements, this was both co-design and co-delivery.	The Strategic PSP was led by a statutory body: the local 'health and social care partnership'.	<u>Three charitable organisations</u> engaged in supported living services for people with learning disabilities. <u>Organisations B C and D</u>	Adults with learning disabilities
SPSP 3	This partnership was established in 2012 to increase the voice of adults with learning disabilities in planning and designing health and social care services and promoting awareness about adult learning needs. In terms of co-production arrangements, this was co-design and embryonic co-delivery in very small pilot projects.	The Strategic PSP was lead partners by two membership organisations promoting advocacy, rights, choice and control for people with learning difficulties.	<u>Two membership organisations</u> promoting advocacy, rights, choice and control for people with learning difficulties. <u>Organisations E and F</u>	Adults with learning disabilities
SPSP 4	This partnership was established in 2013 to develop and test demand-responsive transport services and build the capacity and capability of the community transport sector. In terms of co-production arrangements, this was both co-design and co-delivery.	The Strategic PSP was led by a public sector body.	<u>Three charitable organisations</u> engaged in community transport. <u>Organisations G H and I</u>	Local urban communities

We returned to the literature in an ‘abductive’ (Peirce 1932; Timmermans and Tavory 2012) fashion to understand our data in relation to the different types of third sector organisations and the different models of co-production we had found, and then iteratively built up a picture of how these third sector organisations related to its service users. By ‘moving backward and forward among empirical data, research literature, and emergent theory’ (Dey and Teasdale 2013, 255) our abductive method of analysis supported us to iteratively build a picture of variation in how third sector organisations relate to their service users. The model developed by Kovács and Spens (2005, 139) describes the abductive research process, as shown in Figure 1.

This exploration helped us to construct a framework for understanding the variety of relationships between third sector organisations and their service users. Our various data sources are described in Table 2.

We categorised the small sample of third sector organisations according to Anheier’s (2005) classification (i.e. charitable and membership organisations) and reflected on how they involved service users in the design and delivery of services. Employing a thematic coding method to identify and analyse patterns (themes) within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006), we identified three themes. The first of these themes relates to the diversity of relationships between third sector organisations and their members/ service users (which we have termed ‘formal’ inclusion). The second relates to the extent to which third sector organisations involve members and service users in decision making processes (or ‘informal’ inclusion). The third theme reflects the varying degrees of engagement of third sector organisations in the co-production process.

In summary, our iterative process of analysis and re-analysis and engagement and re-engagement with both literature and data allowed us to identify different types of third sector organisation, different forms of third sector involvement with service users, different degrees of service user inclusion in the governance arrangements of the third sector organisations involved and different levels of engagement of third organisations in the co-production process. This culminated in the development of a typology, which is described more fully following the presentation of our findings.

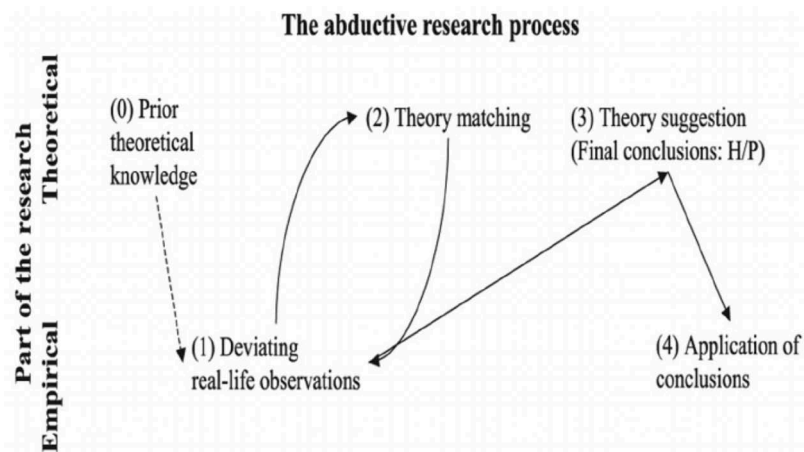


Figure 1. The abductive research process. Source: Kovacs and Spens (2005: 139).



**Table 2.** Data sources.

Strategic PSP	Interviews	Other data collected
1	2 representatives of Scottish Prison Service; 1 representative of Community Justice; 1 SPSP coordinator; 1 SPSP manager	Observation and informal discussion with prison officers and analysis of the evaluation report (qualitative quotes of service users)
2	1 Strategic PSP Coordinator 6 Representatives of three Third Sector organisations	Observation and participation at focus group
3	1 SPSP Coordinator, 1 SPSP project manager 7 service users	Participation and observation Operational group involving public sector representatives, third sector representatives and service users
4	1 SPSP Coordinator 2 Representative of SPT 6 representatives of community transport organisations	Observation and participation at focus group

## Findings

We present our findings organised into the three overarching (but inter-linked) themes (Braun and Clarke 2006): *formal inclusion*; *informal inclusion* of service users by third sector organisations; and *different degrees of engagement* of third sector organisations in the co-production process.

### ***'Formal' inclusion of service users by third sector organisations***

This section illustrates the variety of ways in which the third sector organisations have engaged with their service users in a manner we refer to a 'formal' inclusion. We discuss membership organisations and charitable organisations in turn.

#### ***Membership organisations***

The two advocacy membership organisations (organisations E and F leading the Strategic PSP 3) supported people with learning difficulties to make their voice heard in the process of adult social care service (re-) design. The underpinning idea was for service users to participate in the process by becoming members of the third sector organisation. They focused on expanding their membership base and improve their reach and impact through stimulating further participation and engagement.

*And [because they] felt that they were the lone voice of people with learning difficulties, they wanted other [users] involved.* (Membership organisation representative)

These membership organisations (E and F) claimed that by being inclusive they improved their ability to work on *behalf* of the service users. These organisations engaged in marketing and continual dissemination of information in order to increase the number of service users participating in the process of service (re-) design. So, for example, they *'had planning days and consultation events ... we have a mailing list of all the service organisations and things like that within the Greater*

Glasgow area and they all get copied in and told when meetings are and things like that' (Membership organisation representative).

The process of involvement for each individual varied, depending on the needs and abilities of each participant, providing all with the opportunity to chair meetings, for instance, and being supported throughout the process. During planning days, service users would choose the topics important to them, such as relationships, health, transitions into employment, which then later became the work streams of the Strategic PSP. Each work stream was then chaired by two leads – a person with disabilities, and a third sector representative.

*People with learning difficulties chair the meeting, they participate in the meeting. They lead when we do operating groups which happen every six months. And it's all of the partners getting brought together to find out what's happening in the different work streams. And people with learning difficulties lead on that as well* (Membership organisation representative).

By enabling service users to have their opinions listened to and considered within a public setting, the confidence of service users in articulating their needs increased. They recognised the role of the leading membership organisations in enabling this process:

*[Being involved with this organisation] is really, really good. It encourages people to talk, to speak up for themselves as well, and to make new friends. It's also good for your confidence as well, it helps to build up your confidence and it also gives you, I don't know. Good self-esteem.* (Focus group participant)

This, however, was the only case in which service users were enabled by third sector organisations to become central to the service (re-)design process. The fact that these were membership organisations formally led by service users may well have contributed to facilitating this level of participation.

### **Charitable organisations**

Charitable organisations tended to favour different approaches to including the views of the service users. For example, one charitable organisation (organisation A, leading Strategic PSP 1) used their knowledge and experience of *working for* the service users to claim that they represented their views around of the service design.

*during the design [we] engaged with the individuals in the prison and also with those who had been in prison, ex-offenders, to get their views as to what needed to be designed, and then again, in terms of delivery, the process is consistently iterated based on what and how it works for the individuals.* (Charitable organisation representative)

In this way they argued that the professional knowledge gained over their service users replaced the need for meaningful engagement in the design phase of the service. Consultative processes between third sector organisations and service users were also displayed in the contexts of other organisations:

*What we've done was through the community transport organisation, they engaged with the local people to understand what service is required. We did a user-engagement exercise with residents and asked them what the transport problems were. That included focus groups, questionnaires and all the rest of that, until we actually pinned down what it was they wanted. They wanted a more timetabled, traditional service [so] they can turn up at a bus stop and they know a bus is going to go along in ten minute's time.* (Charitable organisation representative)

Through extensive consultations and user-led research, these charitable organisations argued that it was possible to understand whether the opinions expressed by the

service users were reflective of their actual need, enabling them to tailor their provision accordingly. Also, some organisation argued that the good relationships developed through the years with various communities of interest was sufficient to understand local need, so they *'haven't had to do any separate engagement work with service users because we have kind of we have got these really good relationships'* (Public Sector Representative). While most charitable organisations in our study were not user-led or even representative, they did claim to be able to represent their views through consultative expertise.

In some cases, as it was for other charitable organisations (organisations B, C and D in the Strategic PSP 2) involved in the delivery of the co-designed service while service users provided feedback either directly to the charitable organisation or indirectly by using (or not using) the service. For example, one charitable organisation (organisation A, leading Strategic PSP1) argued that closeness to service users enabled informal discussions, suggestions for improvement and encouraged user feedback regarding the quality of service.

*Locally the service has focus groups with people in the prison [...] they're also doing a bit of checking out of what's working and what's not. This checking process is ongoing but there isn't a group as such who have sustained through.* (Charitable organisation representative).

Indeed, the service delivery had changed over the years to reflect the opinions of those involved through incorporating feedback. It should be recognised, however, that the context of working within a prison environment significantly shaped the nature of the relationship between the third sector organisation and the service users. Being prisoners or ex-offenders severely limited the ability of the service users involved to disclose their views in relation to the provision via any other means.

### ***'Informal' inclusion of service users by third sector organisations***

The previous section highlighted that different types of third sector organisation had different (formal) relationships with their service users. While this might suggest that relationships are partially dependent on formal organisational structure – governance arrangements – it is also important to highlight the variation within organisational type. This suggests that even *within* different types of third sector organisation, the extent to which service users are meaningfully included in governance arrangements can vary.

### ***Membership organisations***

Service users were invited to become members of some organisations (organisations E and F, in Strategic PSP3) to design their own services – it should be noted here that the initial aim of the Strategic PSP3 was to address gaps created by the closure of some services for adults with learning disabilities. However, some interviewees raised questions as to the *actual* extent to which service users were included within the governance arrangements of the membership organisation. Some service users perceived the high level of support provided by professionals during the co-design process as a means to monitor and control them, as articulated in following focus group discussion:

R1: *it [participation] should be more person centred, rather than having support workers about, trying to make, or already have support workers there, so if... if support is needed, we can have taken part, part time, make sure it's more person, people with disabilities led.*

R2: *Doing what we're doing, but trying to make sure it's more of that and less and trying to encourage support workers to kind of...*

I: *Step back?*

R2: *Aye, take a step back. And maybe I feel not in a bad way or anything, but not being around the room, not being in the room. (Focus group 2)*

The presence of professionals in meetings informally prevented some service users from taking ownership over the process. Some of the same professionals involved in the provision of support themselves raised concerns about 'forced participation':

*You need to get the ratios right and you should only be at meetings if you bring somebody with learning difficulties that you're supporting. And it's all about people having that strong voice. (Membership organisation representative)*

This arrangement, where professionals maintain a dominant presence, was perceived as problematic by service users and some professionals since it limited the opportunities for service users '*having the choice and control in their own lives, [...] and not like being told [what to do].*' (Focus group 2 participant). Indeed, in thinking about the future, one focus group participant explained that '*things don't just happen with professionals controlling it. Things also happen with people with disabilities at the centre of things, so that's what I'd like to see happen in the future.*'

### **Charitable organisations**

There was also significant variation in the practices of service user involvement adopted by the different charitable organisations in our study. As discussed in the previous section, some carried out consultations (via surveys or events) to gain input into service (re-)design, while others facilitated ongoing communication between their constituent service users and front-line staff. Some interviewees highlighted that '*it's always the same people that go to them, and it is people that can already speak and advocate on behalf of themselves.*' (Public Sector Representative)

Some of the interviewees had doubts as to whether the needs and voices of service users were adequately represented by the charitable organisations in the process of service design. For example, one interviewee suggested that as a charity (organisation C) they were not doing enough, just a '*couple of conversation cafés with members of the public and users*' (Charitable organisation representative). So, while engagement methods between third sector organisations and service users appeared to be meaningful, they were not always seen as meaningful, or even relevant, by service users. While there may have been a desire to consult, the processes were not always tailored to the requirements of service users:

*Sometimes the way the events have been organised, they weren't particularly focused, and they said to people: well we're starting with a blank sheet, giving the implication that services might be entirely different. Whereas I think the more honest answer is, we were always going to have a similar set of services, but we should have been looking at how we could do them better. And so a lot of the engagement, there were ten events, ten half-day events ... but we asked very*

*general questions, where the answers were almost inevitable. (Charitable organisation representative)*

The ability of third sector organisations to use consultation events appropriately can, of course, be limited by the skills of those involved. Results of such events might produce a distorted view of how best to re-design services to reflect the needs of service users or elicit views that are too general to be meaningful. However, these considerations have in turn an important bearing on the ability of the charitable organisations involved to then deliver the services, as we discuss in the next section.

### ***Different degrees of engagement in the co-production process***

From the outset, we identified that different types of third sector organisations may be more relevant or suitable to different stages or modes of co-production, whether co-delivery or co-design. For example, in the context of the membership organisations involved in the study (organisation F, in Strategic PSP 3), while service users were invited to become members of the organisations and take a role in leading the partnership to design their services, their involvement was ‘dictated’ by the need of filling a gap in provision – since the day centres had been closed.

*The kind of purpose of it was to look at alternative provision to day services in Glasgow, because there was already a plan in place to close day centres, and it was to look at alternative options for people. (Membership organisation representative)*

Also, some interviewees noted that in the delivery stage, service users were invited to exert their expertise in specific areas/topics decided by others, such as public authorities like the National Health Service (NHS) on matters that had little relevance for their service but that showed commitment to engaging with specific disadvantaged groups:

*So, I suppose the involvement of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde increased during the time of the partnership [since] they don't fund things like this. However, they'll come to us as the first point of call if they need an easy-read document done. (Membership organisation representative)*

This type of involvement – where service users are ‘invited’ to make decisions on specific topics – reflects an attempt by public authorities to demonstrate widening engagement while retaining control, focusing attention on (very) specific topics decided by others, rather than the service users themselves. Such involvement goes beyond ‘tokenism’ (Hickey and Kipping 1998; Kershaw et al. 2017; Arnstein 1969) however (where broad outcomes are pre-determined), since service users were given an – albeit limited – say in establishing a ‘least bad’ alternative.

There were also instances in which the third sector was viewed as a way to deliver services locally and at lower cost:

*We see that community organisations can be a key player in delivering these services going forward. Both from an affordability point of view, but also from the types of service that we'll look to design. (Public Sector Representative)*

Here the capacity of the third sector to shape future delivery was assumed, while the intent was to involve the third sector as a ‘cheaper option’ for public service

provision. Third sector organisations were being tasked with developing a more comprehensive provision and service re-design in line with a new legislative impetus:

*With the personalisation agenda we needed to be focusing much more than individual outcomes rather than just keeping three people in a house together. So that was kind of where it came from with [self-directed support] legislation, personalisation ... moving forward to much more modern thinking ... We don't have huge amounts of providers that provide support for people with learning disabilities, so we thought the PSP model to be a good one [to develop capacity within the sector to provide this]. (Public Sector Representative)*

Involving service users only in relatively insignificant parts of the coproduction process could not always be laid at the door of public officials. Even well-intending public officials recognised they knew little about the changing the co-production landscape. They wanted to involve service users and followed informal advice to engage the third sector in the process of enhancing and streamlining provision. Several third sector organisations involved in the design stage, however, appeared especially interested in positioning themselves to take advantage of new markets:

*We were told there is going to be a new public social partnership. And if you want to continue to be part of things and develop new business potentially in the future, you needed to go along. (Charitable organisation representative)*

While not problematic in and of itself, this strategic positioning served to distract third sector organisations from advocating for their service users. Indeed, in some Strategic PSPs collaboration was seen as something that, in reality, ‘*had relatively little substance.*’ In some cases, it was reported that ‘*the value [of the Strategic PSP] stopped outside of the meeting.*’

## **Towards a typology of relations between third sector organisations and service users**

We set out to explore variations in how third sector organisations represent the views of service users within co-production arrangements and, indeed, our study revealed a greater variety of relationships between the third sector and service users than the extant literature on co-production has suggested to this point. Based upon our analysis, we have constructed a typology of third sector/service user relationships within co-production processes, which is presented in [Figure 2](#), where we have mapped the third sector organisations and their respective Strategic PSP onto our framework. It is worth noting here that while for heuristic purposes we have located each organisation in one quadrant of the framework, some organisations may use practices that map onto different quadrants, as different relationships can occur within the same organisation.

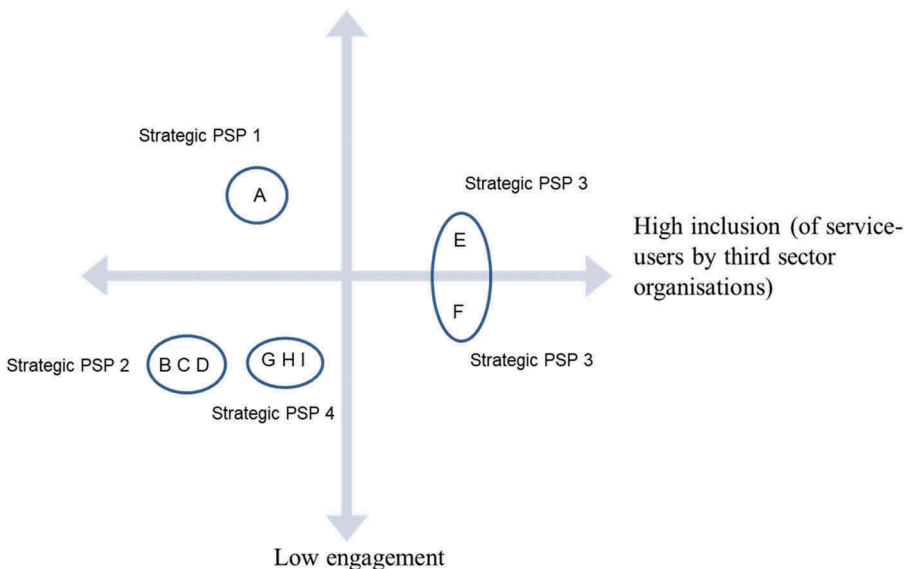
The co-production literature suggests there are varying degrees of service user involvement (Kershaw et al 2017; Radnor et al. 2013) and in the degree of engagement of the third sector in the process of co-production (Brandsen and Pestoff 2006) (vertical axis); while the third sector literature suggests that governance structures can reflect the way in which the third sector organisation relates to its membership (Anheier 2005) (horizontal axis). This combination thus produces four different scenarios.

### Scenario 1 – service users are enabled by the third sector organisation

When third sector organisations are meaningfully engaged in co-production arrangements and *include* their service users in their governance arrangements (top-right quadrant), service users have a high degree of control over co-production arrangements and the decision-making process (Hickey and Kipping 1998). This is the ‘ideal’ relationship that is often presented in the co-production literature when the third sector is considered as an *enabler* (e.g. Pestoff 2012). Strategic PSP 3 was a good example of this, where service users appeared in control of the process of service design as lead partners. The membership-based governance of the third sector organisations involved may have contributed positively to the ‘enabling’ process. However, we also found that even where third sector organisations directly include service users the process, such inclusion might ultimately be meaningless, since the ultimate outcome of consultation and partnership might be predetermined.

### Scenario 2 – excessive control and tokenistic participation

When third sector organisations meaningfully include service users in the governance of the organisation but are not themselves meaningfully engaged in the co-production process (bottom right quadrant), this can reflect an approach to co-production that is ultimately likely to disenfranchise third sector organisations and their service users. For example, the membership organisation (organisation F part of the Strategic PSP3) included the adult users of the learning disabilities services through a variety of practices tailored to the needs of the group, as we discussed in the first section of our findings. Yet many service users disclosed that they were often invited to make decisions over pre-set topics and the presence of professionals was often overwhelming. While the extent to which service users are ‘meaningfully’



**Figure 2.** Co-production and the third sector: a typology.



engaged in the co-production process is only likely to concern those scholars who consider engagement to be a voluntary act (Brandsen and Pestoff 2006), the interest in this perspective has therefore been limited to date. However, this finding suggests that having a particular governance structure does not automatically mean that a third sector organisation will adequately serve the interests of its service users, particularly within the context of co-production.

### ***Scenario 3 – services users are represented by the third sector organisation***

When service users are not directly included by the third sector organisation, but the third sector organisation is meaningfully engaged in the coproduction process (top left quadrant), this reflects the *representative* role of the third sector in relation to their service users and their needs (Brandsen and von Hout 2006; Strokosch and Osborne 2017). For example, the charitable organisation involved in the Strategic PSP 1 ‘spoke on behalf’ of service users, legitimised by the experience of working in the field, the proximity to the service users and the ‘appropriateness’ of representation (see also Eriksson 2018). Whether voluntary or coerced (as it was the case for the charitable organisation involved in Strategic PSP 1 representing the views of the users of the prison throughcare service) the input of service users is here determined by the direct, face-to-face contact and interaction with the service producers, generating the synergy between production and consumption (Radnor et al. 2013; Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016).

### ***Scenario 4 – limited voice of the service users***

Finally, where third sector organisations do not include their service users meaningfully and are themselves not fully engaged in the co-production process (bottom left quadrant), this seemingly represents what others have referred to as the ‘dark side’ of co-production (see Williams et al. 2015). Sadly, the data from our study suggests this might not be uncommon. Our analysis found examples of informal inclusion of service users by charitable organisations as mainly a box-ticking exercise, as interviewees disclosed that their organisation was felt not to be doing enough to represent the needs and views of service users. For example, some of the charities involved in the Strategic PSP 2 suggested that the introduction of specific legislation (such as we saw in our discussion of the personalisation agenda) may have forced organisations to involve service user perspectives in designing new services during the co-production experimentation. However, many of the third sector organisations involved were driven by the desire to create a market share in the future. However, from a ‘Public Service Logic’ perspective this may not necessarily represent a problem, since it allows public officials to ‘get things done’ while paying lip service to the principles of co-production.

Overall, our analysis suggests that engagement is more likely to be meaningful when third sector organisations are lead actors in co-production arrangements, and when third sector organisations themselves include their members or service users in the governance of the organisation. Nevertheless, our analysis has revealed that power differentials between budget holders and service providers meant that relationships were sometimes perceived as unequal and opportunistic; in some cases, guided by necessity and/or the intention to gain future commissions. For example, some



charitable organisations (particularly those involved in the Strategic PSP 2) were ‘invited’ to participate in the service re-design of the supported living services if they wanted to develop new business opportunities in future.

## Conclusion

In this paper we sought to explore variation in relationships between the third sector and service users in the co-production process, challenging the assumption that third sector organisations can be an effective proxy for service user engagement. To some extent, relationships between third sector organisations and service users correlated with what we might expect from the literature: membership organisations were able to directly articulate service user needs through drawing on lived experience. In some cases, service users were directly involved in the co-production process. Charitable organisations, on the other hand, claimed legitimacy through their long-standing relationships with service users, and/or an expertise in consultation methods. However, our study also highlighted that the type of third sector organisation is not a guarantor of meaningful service user inclusion. We found diversity in the degrees of engagement both among and between charitable organisations and membership organisations. Third sector organisations cannot therefore be simplistically assumed to be a proxy for service user engagement in co-production processes; when looking at these processes, commissioners of public services should consider what type of third sector organisation they are looking at, and their level of engagement in the process since third sector governance arrangements by themselves are not sufficient to guarantee the effective inclusion of service users. We consider that our findings extend knowledge of, and add nuance to, extant understandings of relationships within co-production processes to support the improvement of policy outcomes.

Our study was, however, limited by virtue of the specific context in which the study took place, and the fact that in different contexts, one might expect a wider variety of different types of third sector organisations involved. On the former point, the ‘Scottish approach’ to policymaking emphasises collaboration between government and citizens but has been introduced from ‘above’ at a time of limited resources, while expected to be implemented at the local level by local authorities who are not only potentially resistant to change (Cairney, Siabhainn, and St Denny 2016) but also facing significant cuts due to a decade of public sector austerity. When commissioners are forced to ‘do’ co-production with limited resources, the temptation may be to use limited engagement as a cover for predetermined service cuts and to see the third sector as a means to deliver services more cheaply. The relationship between service users and third sector organisations is contextually dependent on a variety of factors (including power dynamics and individual relationships) in a similar way to the relationship between the third sector organisations and Strategic PSPs. Nonetheless, future research might fruitfully investigate the extent to which formal inclusion of service users within the third sector organisation (*viz.* Kelly 2007) positively influences outcomes for service users within the context of co-production arrangements. To conclude, we consider the contribution of our work adds depth to existing understandings of co-production. It is necessary for commissioners to better understand the groups they are working with in co-production arrangements in order to achieve ‘better’ policy outcomes, howsoever determined. We contend that our study offers an initial starting point.

## Notes

1. We carried out 28 in-depth face-to-face interviews with a wide range of stakeholders including SPSP strategic coordinators – the leads (n = 6), SPSP operational managers (n = 3), representatives of third sector partners (n = 7), representatives of public sector partners (n = 11) and representatives of academia (n = 1). We also conducted 13 interviews with: key third sector funders (n = 2); Ready for Business (RfB) Consortium representatives (n = 5); Scottish Government officials involved in procurement and the Change Fund PSP models (n = 4); and other stakeholders promoting alternative models and commissioning processes (n = 2).
2. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/report-date-strategic-public-social-partnership-psp-model-scotland/>.
3. In the two cases we do not use in this paper there were up to thirty third sector organisations and it proved next to impossible to unpack the various relationships between the organisations and their users.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Scottish Government Third Sector Unit;

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